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SUBJECT: FRANCE/SYRIA: WAITING FOR BASHAR

REF: PARIS POINTS FOR 3 JULY 2008

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) In addition to what was reported in ref, French Presidency NEA adviser Boris Boillon discussed Syria and Lebanon with us July 2. French President Sarkozy, according to Boillon, raised the status of the indirect dialogue between Syria and Israel via Turkey with Israeli PM Olmert. The Israelis indicated a desire to move toward direct talks, but not for a while, i.e., until a greater measure of trust and confidence had built up. Boillon claimed the Israelis also stated that they would eventually insist on a link between any resolution of the Golan territorial issue and a rupture of Syria's currently close relations with Iran and Hizballah. Meanwhile, the Syrians have effectively echoed Israel's lack of enthusiasm for the immediate opening of direct talks by expressing their own preference to keep the talks indirect, particularly given the Israelis' failure to respond positively to the security paper passed via the Turks. Boillon thought the two sides would wait a further six months before deciding definitively on switching to direct talks.

¶2. (C) Given this context, Boillon was doubtful a much rumored side meeting brokered by the French in Paris between Olmert and Asad would be possible. He would not completely rule it out, because the headstrong Sarkozy is likely to wait to see whether a potential occasion presents itself, but he claimed France was not naive on this score. Indeed, the Syrians have consistently insisted that they do not want to be seated near the Israelis or pushed into situations that would require handshakes with Israeli officials.

¶3. (C) In terms of presidential meetings related to the summit, Boillon said the only one-on-ones planned were with Egyptian President Mubarak, Lebanese President Sleiman, and Syrian President Asad. (Comment: We are surprised that he did not mention Algerian President Bouteflika. End comment) These would occur on July 12, i.e., a day before the summit takes place. On the 13th, Sarkozy would meet jointly with PM Olmert and Palestinian President Abbas. Boillon stressed that this session would in no way undercut U.S.-led efforts under the Annapolis process but were intended to reinforce the message that the two parties needed to work hard and take the lead in order to reach agreement. The Elysee, however, would make available a meeting room so the two men could transact any business between them as they wished.

¶4. (C) Although Boillon heaped scorn on the "Ayatollahs and Mullahs" at the MFA, he independently made the same assertion we had heard at the Quai d'Orsay: Asad's presence would be more difficult to justify publicly than it already is without the formation of a new Lebanese government beforehand. To

this end, the French are putting pressure on Lebanese actors to reach agreement before July 13. They will do the same with Syrian FM Mu'allim when he visits Paris July 4 to advance President Asad's visit. Should there be no announcement of a new Lebanese government, the GOF would consider hosting a tripartite meeting between Sarkozy, Asad, and Sleiman. As we explored this concept further, Boillon allowed as how it could draw in other regional actors (NFI). He also said that Sarkozy may try to get Sleiman and Asad together even if a new government had been formed in order to begin discussions of normalizing Syrian/Lebanese relations. Boillon underscored that France's top two priorities vis-a-vis Lebanon currently were formation of a new government and normalization of Syrian/Lebanese relations. On the latter, and further to meetings with visiting NEA A/S Welch in mid-June, the French are drawing up a list of benchmarks related to normalization that would include opening embassies, exchanging ambassadors, and formally demarcating international boundaries.

15. (C) With respect to the details of Mu'allim's July 4 visit, Boillon indicated he would have a working lunch with FM Kouchner followed by meetings from 1600-1800 at the Elysee. The latter meetings would be with French Presidency SecGen Claude Gueant, Presidential diplomatic adviser Jean David Levitte, and Boillon. Depending on how the meeting went, Sarkozy might participate briefly. (Comment: The MFA announced July 3 that Kouchner would not be able to meet with Mu'allim because Kouchner had departed Paris for Bogota in the wake of the release of Colombian/French national hostage Ingrid Betancourt. In Kouchner's place, the MFA SecGen Gerard Errera will receive Mu'allim. End comment)

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16. (C) Boillon also spoke a bit about what we have heard was the furious Saudi reaction to Asad's invitation to Paris. Boillon acknowledged that an emissary (who we subsequently learned was Minister of Commerce and Industry Ali Reza) visited Paris about two weeks ago to deliver a message from King Abdallah. Boillon claimed the letter suggested Abdallah had been misinformed as to the main reason Asad was coming to Paris and had focused on his attendance at the July 14 military parade. Abdallah complained that it was wrong to reward Asad, given Syria's responsibility for the situation in Lebanon. We have heard separately that Sarkozy exploded in anger upon receiving the letter, but Boillon did not reveal Sarkozy's immediate reaction. He did, however, dismiss much of what motivated Abdallah as an unacceptable vision of the Muslim world divided between hostile Sunni and Shi'a camps. Boillon also maintained that France had a hard time accepting the Saudi view of the situation when it knows the Saudis have been a primary sponsor of Salafist networks for years. Sarkozy also took pains to remind Ali Reza that he was not Chirac and refused to personalize issues related to Lebanon as Chirac had and Abdallah still does. The Elysee subsequently sent a response to Abdallah clarifying the situation involving Asad (i.e., that he would attend the July 14 parade as a courtesy extended to other heads of state attending the summit), and Boillon claimed that tensions had since eased.

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